

# Pakistan: Islamabad succumbs

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**Pakistan's president is doing nothing to prevent the country's capital from becoming an Taliban stronghold.**

After his ill-advised dismissal of the chief justice of Pakistan's supreme court ignited violent protest, President Pervez Musharraf may be banking on Islamic fanatics to create chaos in the nation's capital, Islamabad. Many suspect that an engineered bloodbath that leads to army intervention, and the declaration of a national emergency, could serve as a pretext to postpone the October 2007 elections. This could make way for Musharraf's dictatorial rule to continue into its eighth year - and perhaps well beyond.

This perverse strategy sounds almost unbelievable. Musharraf, who George Bush describes as his "buddy", supports an "enlightened moderate" version of Islam, and wears two close attempts on his life by religious extremists as a badge of honour. But his secret reliance upon the Taliban card - one that he has been accused of playing for years - is increasing as his authority weakens.

Signs of government-engineered chaos abound. In the heart of Islamabad, vigilante groups from a government-funded mosque, the Lal Masjid, roam the streets and bazaars, imposing Islamic morality and terrorising citizens in full view of the police. Openly sympathetic to the Taliban and tribal militants fighting the Pakistan army, the two cleric brothers who head Lal Masjid, Maulana Abdul Aziz and Maulana Abdur Rashid Ghazi, have attracted a core of banned militant organisations around them. These include Jaish-e-Muhammad, considered a pioneer of suicide bombings in the region.

The clerics openly defy the state. Since January 21, baton-wielding, burka-clad students of the Jamia Hafsa, the woman's Islamic university

located next to the headquarters of Lal Masjid, have forcibly occupied a government building, the Children's Library. In one of their many forays outside the seminary, this burka brigade swooped upon a house that they claimed was a brothel, and kidnapped three women and a baby.

Male students from Islamabad's many madrasas are even more active in terrorising video-shop owners, whom they accuse of spreading pornography. Newspapers have carried pictures of grand bonfires made with seized cassettes and CDs. Most video stores in Islamabad have now closed. Their owners duly repented after a fresh campaign on May 4 by militants blew up a dozen music and video stores, barbershops and a girl's school in the North-West Frontier Province.

Astonishing patience has been shown by the Pakistani state, which on other occasions freely used air and artillery power to combat such challenges. Lal Masjid seems to operate with impunity - no attempt has been made to cut off its electricity, gas, phone or website - or even to shut down its illegal FM radio station. The chief negotiator appointed by Musharraf, Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain, described the burka brigade kidnapers as "our daughters", with whom negotiations would continue and against whom "no operation could be contemplated".

Clerics realise that the government wants to play ball. Their initial demand - the rebuilding of eight illegally constructed mosques that had been knocked down by Islamabad's civic administration - became a call for enforcement of Sharia law across Pakistan. In a radio broadcast on April 12, the clerics issued a threat: "There will be suicide blasts in the nook and cranny of the country. We have weapons, grenades, and we are expert in manufacturing bombs. We are not afraid of death."

Lal Masjid's head cleric, a former student of my university in Islamabad, added the following chilling message for our women students:

"The government should abolish coeducation. Quaid-e-Azam University has become a brothel. Its female professors and students roam in objectionable dresses. I think I will have to send my daughters of Jamia Hafsa to these immoral

women. They will have to hide themselves in hijab, otherwise they will be punished according to Islam. Our female students have not issued the threat of throwing acid on the uncovered faces of women. However, such a threat could be used for creating the fear of Islam among sinful women. There is no harm in it. There are far more horrible punishments in the hereafter for such women."

Indeed, on May 7, a female teacher in the QAU history department was physically assaulted in her office by a bearded, Taliban-looking man who screamed that he had instructions from Allah.

What's next? As Islamabad heads the way of Pakistan's tribal towns, the next targets will be girls' schools, internet cafes, bookshops, and shops selling western clothing, followed by purveyors of toilet paper, tampons, underwear, mannequins and other un-Islamic goods.

In a sense, the inevitable is coming to pass. Until a few years ago, Islamabad was a quiet, orderly, modern city no different from any other in Pakistan. Still earlier, it was largely the abode of Pakistan's elite and foreign diplomats. But the rapid transformation of its demography brought with it hundreds of mosques with multi-barrelled audio cannons mounted on minarets, as well as scores of madrasas, illegally constructed in what used to be public parks and green areas. Now, tens of thousands of their students with prayer caps dutifully chant the Qu'ran all day. In the evenings, they roam in packs through the city's streets and bazaars, gaping at store windows and lustfully ogling bare-faced women.

The stage is being set for transforming Islamabad into a Taliban stronghold. When Musharraf exits - which may be sooner rather than later - he will leave a bitter legacy that will last for generations, all for a little more taste of power.

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**P.S.**

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